



## **“Is YHWH a Polygamous God?”**

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January, 2012

The question of whether or not plural marriage is acceptable to God seems to resurface again and again. Most Americans’ first thought is of Mormonism being most closely associated with polygamy; however, other groups practice it as well. Some groups calling themselves some variation on a name such as Biblical Patriarchal Christian or even Free Men and Women Christian have also practiced plural marriage. A discussion of polygamy seems to be “under the table” in many Messianic groups or organizations. Some openly promote it; some condemn it, while others quietly condone it by not confronting it. Most just ignore the question.

Though we do not claim to have a corner on THE final correct understanding here, I’d like to state something of what we currently believe and why. In our opinion in this community, the question of the practice of polygamy should not be ignored but prayerfully discerned. We think that the pattern of His creative work, and the character and nature of our Elohim—encouraging all to choose life-- should be important considerations.

### **Definition of Terms**

Most people know that marriage between one man and one woman is called *monogamy*. Monogamy may be a life time relationship or it may be *serial monogamy*, which is a series of marriages, but there is just one woman and one man in the relationship at a time.

The term *polygamy* is a general term referring to any kind of plural marriage and is the most frequent term in general use. Merriam-Webster defines it as:

“marriage in which a spouse of either sex may have more than one mate at the same time.”

Two related terms are *polygyny* and *polyandry*.

Polygyny: the state or practice of having more than one wife or female mate at a time.

Polyandry: the state or practice of having more than one husband or male mate at one time. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polygamy> January 11, 2012

A third related term is *bigamy*:

the act of entering into a marriage with one person while still legally married to another.<sup>2</sup> It is further noted that the second marriage is illegal under most civil law, and considered a criminal offense.<sup>3</sup>

The sociological term often used is *group marriage*, referring to either type. ( I have a BA in Sociology/Anthropology so once in a while I do refer to that background though I do not agree with much of what is taught.)

The general concern for those debating whether or not YHWH approves of plural marriage is that of polygyny, plural wives, rather than plural husbands. Polyandry is generally considered rare. In sociological terms, it is also recognized that survival is an issue. It is easier to maintain population with few men and many women.

### **Prevalence of Polygamy**

This question seems to lead to widely varying estimates. I have seen estimates of those living in polygamous relationships in America ranging from 30,000 to 100,000. Worldwide estimates of numbers are also rather vague but the practice is reported as widespread. One site insists it is problematic in Africa, especially Kenya, while another says it works well there. (*Note: Yahweh's Set Apart Ministries in Kenya does not promote polygamy.*) I will list several websites with such information should the reader want to pursue this more fully and more is found quite easily.

Since this is a controversial issue, with varied understandings as well as being an illegal arrangement in many places it is probably safe to say that it isn't really possible to obtain a firm number. In some places, the practice is to have any additional wives as "spiritual wives" which is not the same thing as being the wife who is married with both religious and civil approval. This keeps the practice under the radar of regulation. At least two leaders in the Messianic movement advocate that these are two entirely different kinds of relationships, not to be confused with one another.

### **Long Term Unresolved Issue**

Since it is evident throughout Scriptures that many of the patriarchs had more than one wife and since there is no direct condemnation of the practice and scriptural guideless are given for when there is more than one wife, people have concluded that it is acceptable, and some even that it is *desirable* and scriptural. On the other hand, some people offer blanket condemnation. This polarized "either/or" approach is not consistent with a Hebraic worldview which is briefly characterized as "both/and."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bigamy> January 11, 2012

<sup>3</sup> The criminal offense of marrying one person while still legally married to another. (The Free Online Dictionary, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bigamy>)

## Role of Women

In many situations where polygyny is practiced, women have been defined as somehow inferior to men or less deserving of autonomy. This, too, is a controversial area and has spawned the terms “complimentarian” and “egalitarian.”<sup>4</sup> One justification for this has been that it was *Chavah*/Eve who was deceived and thus all women since then pay the price of being more easily deceived, leaving Adam as the declared head.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there is the Talmudic interpretation that all women are more spiritual than men, based on the courage of the midwives at the time of the Exodus; thus they don’t need the same kind of teachings and rituals that men do in order to grow spiritually.<sup>6</sup> Neither position seems to match the heart and character of YHWH as we know Him.

We often see the comparison used of the sun and the moon as the greater and lesser lights, as a model for the husband and wife relationship, with the husband represented as the sun, and the wife as the moon. In our viewpoint this is a misinterpretation based on a misunderstanding of YHWH’s character and plan for us. We would see that it is Messiah Who is doing the shining, while all we as mankind, in preparation toward that spiritual picture of becoming His Bride, do the reflecting. We do NOT see this as recommendation for plural marriage in this physical world but as an allegorical representation; along the same lines as describing our Elohim as a Rock.

We would further note that a wife is described as a “helpmeet” which is often interpreted as being secondary or inferior. The Hebrew word often translated as helpmeet or helper is עֵזֶר which is transliterated as “ezer *knegdo*” and in brief, refers to the deliverer who is both *for* what is good and *against* what is bad. YHWH uses that word, *ezer*, of Himself as a Deliverer. If it is inferior by connotation, how would it be also used of Him? The very fact that YHWH Himself declared that a man is incomplete alone and needs a helpmeet should tell us that women are crucial to the proper function of society, not an afterthought as some seem to imply.

## Our Approach

*All scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*

*2 Timothy 3: 16-17 KJV*

**The Torah, Prophets and writings provide many models of both righteous and unrighteous behavior.** Ours is not to judge but to discern in our ongoing desire to be made perfect, complete and fully mature.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://strivetoenter.com/wim/author/Cheryl/> and <http://strivetoenter.com/wim/women-in-ministry-silenced-or-set-free-dvd/> Women in Ministry: Silenced or Set Free? By Cheryl Schatz

<sup>5</sup> <http://strivetoenter.com/wim/2010/03/01/women-more-easily-deceived/> Blog hosted by Cheryl Schatz; <http://www.cbmw.org/> The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. A “complimentarian” viewpoint.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/1465248/jewish/The-Untold-Story-of-the-Hebrew-Midwives-and-the-Exodus.htm](http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1465248/jewish/The-Untold-Story-of-the-Hebrew-Midwives-and-the-Exodus.htm)

Women’s Wisdom; Rabbi Arush Shalom, Chut Shel Chessed Institutions, 2010.

An important concept in the correct interpretation of Scripture is to be certain that it fulfills the Torah; or in our words, accurately reflects the heart and character of YHWH. It is always best to have a range of information in order to draw large conclusions or establish doctrine, rather than just one or two verses, in what is often called *proof-texting*: the practice of using isolated verses to establish a particular position without regard for the context.

Example: Recently, a ministry leader drew support for polygamy from two verses:

*And the names <sup>8034</sup> of them [were] Aholah <sup>170</sup> the elder <sup>1419</sup>, and Aholibah <sup>172</sup> her sister <sup>269</sup>: and they were mine, and they bare <sup>3205</sup> sons <sup>1121</sup> and daughters <sup>1323</sup>. Thus [were] their names <sup>8034</sup>; Samaria <sup>8111</sup> [is] Aholah <sup>170</sup>, and Jerusalem <sup>3389</sup> Aholibah <sup>172</sup>.*  
Ezekiel 23: 4 KJV

and

*And in that day <sup>3117</sup> seven <sup>7651</sup> women <sup>802</sup> shall take hold <sup>2388</sup> of one <sup>259</sup> man <sup>376</sup>, saying <sup>559</sup>, We will eat <sup>398</sup> our own bread <sup>3899</sup>, and wear <sup>3847</sup> our own apparel <sup>8071</sup>: only let us be called <sup>7121</sup> by thy name <sup>8034</sup>, to take away <sup>622</sup> our reproach <sup>2781</sup>.*  
Isaiah 4:1 KJV

In the Ezekiel story, the reasoning offered was that YHWH had the two daughters, *Aholah* and *Aholibah*, as wives. This conclusion seems based on the phrase “they were mine and they bare sons and daughters.” This phrase comes from the Hebrew word  $\text{יָלַד}$  transliterated as *yalad*, meaning to bring forth, (Strong’s # 3205) and can have both positive and negative connotations. I would also see that it could be understood that these two women, actually representative of cities, had declared themselves followers of the God of Israel yet fell away. It seems clear to us that this is an allegorical picture, not to be understood literally. Furthermore, to take it literally would conflict with other Scripture, such as Ezekiel 37:16-22, particularly 22, which clearly states that the two parts of the family shall be made one. There are also many verses in the *Brit Chadasha*/Renewed Covenant that make it very clear that Yeshua’s Bride is “One Body consisting of many members.” (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 6:16, 1 Cor 10:17, 1 Cor 12:12-13, 1 Cor 12:20, Eph 2:16, Eph 4:4, Col 3:15, etc.)

In the Isaiah verse, I believe the reasoning that this represents plural marriage comes from the phrase “shall take hold of” one man, which is the Hebrew word,  $\text{חָזַק}$  transliterated as *chazak*, in brief, meaning to strengthen or to take hold. (Strong’s #2388) This is not the common verb used to signify taking in marriage so it is not clear to me that it specifically refers to marriage, though it could. The second phrase “only let us be called by thy name” could be a more clear indication of a marriage relationship in relation to the being “called”, yet Gesenius Lexicon offers quite an extensive listing of the meanings of this word  $\text{קָרָא}$  transliterated as *qara* (Strong’s # 7121), which can include being called an assembly, not necessarily husband and wife (wives).

If we use the consistency of this kind of interpretation in Zechariah 8:23 would it mean that is it okay for 10 men to 'marry' and have unnatural relations with a Jewish man because the same *chazak* is used??? "Thus says YHWH of hosts: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm

hold/'chazak' of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" Our answer is certainly not!

It should also be remembered that scripture faithfully records what people *do*, despite the fact that often their actions are not in accord with YHWH's wishes. This prophecy may simply be a factual recording of the actions of these women without indicating any approval of those actions.

The Word also teaches through thematic messages, recurrent pictures and images and stories. This is one way that we can "see" the heart and character of our God who is twelve parts mercy and one part justice. (*Exodus 34:6-7*) We also understand that there is significance to the first mention of a topic. In this, we can see a recurring pattern of how men and women are put together by YHWH and how they are put together by man. This seems relevant to the question of plural marriage as well.

I have a study in progress, looking at the differences implied by the use of two phrases: "taking a wife", or "being given a wife." I have seen no clear conclusions as yet and it may not even really BE different, but here are the most frequently used verbs if the reader would like to do their own study.

Strong's H3947 - *laqach* לָקַח to take

Strong's H5414 - *nathan* נָתַן to give

My question has been: Is there a different pattern for situations in which YHWH puts man and woman together vs. how mankind puts man and woman together?

#### **Two situations in which YHWH certainly put man and woman together:**

**Adam and Chavah/Eve:** one man and one woman

**Noah and wife; three sons and wives;** one man and one woman picture

#### **Situations in which man put man and woman(women) together:**

**Lamech:** First recorded incidence of two wives, of Cain's line—great-great grandson; unclear reason

**Abram:** two wives, later a third after death of Sarah; accepted Hagar at Sarah's suggestion

**Isaac:** one wife; given to him, **very** significant Messianic pictures in Isaac's life

**Esau:** two wives, taken, one by choice and one in misguided attempt to placate parents

**Jacob:** two wives and two concubines; first wife by deceit, second by choice, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> by expediency?

**Joseph:** one wife; given to him; significant Messianic pictures in Joseph's life

**Moses:** one wife; given to him; then absent; second wife by apparent choice; significant Messianic pictures in Moses' life

**David:** one wife given to him; lost through deceit; multiple wives by expediency, lust, political diplomacy?

**Solomon:** multiple wives: diplomacy? Other reasons?

**Elkanah:** two wives, reason unclear

There may well be more examples, but this is a start in consideration.

If YHWH intended plural marriages would it be safe to conclude that He could have created Adam, and Chavah 1, Chavah 2, Chavah 3 and so forth? It certainly would have been expedient to populate the earth. Instead He chose to make them as one initially, then separate them, and yet immediately tell them that the two shall be one.<sup>7</sup>

If YHWH intended plural marriages would it be safe to conclude that He could have just put Noah on the ark with 7 wives? This would have been expedient to again repopulate the earth. Instead it was just the three couples, Shem, Ham and Japheth's lines that repopulated the earth. We see it as another one man and one woman picture.<sup>8</sup>

We would also point to these two witnesses in the *Brit Chadasha/NT*, declaring the preference or even requirement, that a male leader be the husband of one wife.

*A bishop then must be blameless, **the husband of one wife**, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;*  
1 Timothy 3:2 KJV

*If any be blameless, **the husband of one wife**, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.*  
Titus 1:6 KJV

We see this as an affirmation of YHWH's original intent for marriage to be between one man and one woman. *(There are many other ramifications of this as well as what we understand to be misinterpretations that cannot be fully addressed here. We do address them elsewhere.)*

It has seemed to us that plural marriage is not the intended plan for us, but that in His compassion, YHWH has made allowance for the circumstances of this difficult life and all its troubles; just as He

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<sup>7</sup> There is more about this whole picture in *And the Two Shall Become One...* PowerPoint introduction to study on our site; a large study still in final development.

<sup>8</sup> I confess that I have been curious as to why it seems that Noah and his wife had no additional children after the flood. Still, there is a pattern here, too. *This is speculation*: it was these three couples that repopulated the earth and there were three couples of patriarch/matriarch in Abraham's line. This *may* be another thematic picture of life, death and resurrection so often associated with the use of "threes," in these cases three couples. There is more than one level of meaning and comprehension as Hebraic interpretation comes in layers. Since preserving life is a main concern for our Elohim and we know that Noah and his line were about preserving life in the aftermath of the flood, so, too, do we see that Abraham's line was about preserving life. This *may* provide an insight as to the "allowance" for more than one wife in two situations within that line, working His blessings through even imperfect obedience. Could it be compassion to release Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah from the tyranny of Laban? In the spiritual sense of being called to be light in the world they were ultimately to prepare the way for Messiah, preservation of life in a much larger sense than any specific couple. In any event, we can trust that He had His reasons for working in unusual ways and, whatever they were, they were and are for our good.

allowed for divorce due to hardness of heart, also not in His original intentions. Each time a plural marriage is addressed, it seems to be in the context of trouble; whether that be external situational stressors such as war or internal conflict within the marriage. The article written for *Chabad*<sup>9</sup> as listed below in the Resources offers thoughts along this line as well to my surprise.

### Current Conclusions

This matter of marriage to more than one wife is yet another area in which the answers are as clear as mud. We often say here at SAM that the maturity of the person is a great indicator of their ability to correctly interpret Scripture, without falling into rigid legalism or frivolous license. **Both Mama and Papa's Torah training are necessary to be able to discern wisely.**<sup>10</sup> The interpretations about plural marriages are polarized and do range from rigid legalism to frivolous license.

We affirm the picture of one man and one woman in marriage as first presented in the beginning, and reinforced at the time of the flood to be our Creators intention. The first mention of multiple wives comes in relation to Cain's bloodline, which we would not see to be a preferred model to emulate. We see that this picture is supported in the *Brit Chadasha* by two witnesses.

Each of these polygynist marriages of the patriarchs is marked with both consequences of the struggles as well as blessings at times. We do not see this as approval but more tolerance only when most necessary. Ours is to discern, not to judge.

Would we say that it is a matter of indifference to our Elohim? No, we wouldn't go to that interpretation at all. Plural marriage does not appear to be recommended, yet in some extreme circumstances, if there is a need for compassion in some way, it happens. Is this not rather like Shabbat observance? No, we are not to take it lightly because He has given us this time of rest to be in His Presence, yet if the ox falls in the ditch or the modern equivalent happens, we would pull it out! The preservation of Life is a prime characteristic of the heart and nature of our Elohim, and should be prominent for us as well. I do not think that the terrible times that would lead to such an adjustment are an ongoing situation but rather one that arises periodically throughout history.

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<sup>9</sup> This group does not acknowledge Yeshua as Messiah, among other differences, so we are not in full agreement with their teachings yet we do find common ground at times. [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) Description of "Chabad" from their site: Chabad-Lubavitch is a philosophy, a movement, and an organization. It is considered to be the most dynamic force in Jewish life today. Lubavitch appropriately means the "city of brotherly love" **The word "Chabad"** is a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of *chochmah*—wisdom, *binah*—comprehension and *da'at*—knowledge. The movement's system of Jewish religious philosophy, the deepest dimension of G-d's Torah, teaches understanding and recognition of the Creator, the role and purpose of creation, and the importance and unique mission of each creature. This philosophy guides a person to refine and govern his or her every act and feeling through wisdom, comprehension and knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> (There is further explanation of this in the introductory video on our home page, *Be Ye Set Apart*.)

Unfortunately, in many times and places, polygyny has resulted in abuse and oppression for women and children when there is a misunderstanding of what headship means. I do not think it is hard to find agreement here that such behavior is NOT within the heart and character of our God.

May we all find His wisdom and understanding in order to be able to provide wise counsel as needed.

#### Resources

[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/770990/jewish/Why-does-Torah-law-allow-polygamy.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/770990/jewish/Why-does-Torah-law-allow-polygamy.htm) January 11, 2012

<http://www.polygamystop.org/home-page.html> January 11, 2012

<http://www.polygamy.com/> January 11, 2012

*I am grateful for the editing suggestions in form, style and content from Bob Klika, Janell Schroeder, Marsha Van in our community and two more gracious people elsewhere who have provided their feedback. This remains a work in progress as understanding increases. May Messiah's Name be praised as we all continue to learn together!*